

Engaging New Law Lecturers and Reflections on the Engagement

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the experience of two new law lecturers who took up their posts in August 2007. It considers the process of ‘getting the job’ as well as the period of settling into a new institution and new career path. Further reflection on those engagements is then offered by the Head of School to provide a balanced picture of the appointment of new law lecturers.

Introduction

Every person who holds or has held an academic position at Higher Education level has a unique experience of interview and of ‘settling in’. As new lecturers – having taken up our first posts in August 2007 – the first semester was particularly poignant. We started from slightly different stand points; one of us having just completed a taught LLM in law, the other having worked as a socio-legal researcher for the previous 3 years. On reflection, the whole whirlwind process of ‘getting the job’ is split into three separate categories: interview, formalities, and settling in.

Interview

¹ Bradford University Law School. The authors would like to thank participants of the Association of Law Teachers Annual Conference 2008 and the Socio-Legal Studies Association Annual Conference 2008 for fruitful discussions on this topic. We would also like to thank our colleagues in the Law School and in particular Val Hutchings for their support, patience and encouragement.

When attending for the interview it is perhaps normal to be full of expectations, questions and of course nerves. Our experiences in March 2007 were no different. What kind of welcome would we receive when arriving for interview? Would it be a place in which we might happily work for the next ten years? What did Bradford University expect of me? What standards of teaching and research were suitable for the School? What attitude and approach towards teaching and research were they looking for? What are the fellow members of staff like? Is the Law School a friendly place, or will I be resuming my job search within weeks of starting the post? Most importantly, do my plans for the future correspond with the aspirations the Bradford University Law School has for its own development?

The application form for the lectureship came with no request for a personal statement, which would have described our reasons for applying for the job, and references were not sought until after the job had been offered to us. There was very little scope in the application documents to explain why we wanted the position or why we would fit the position. We each had our separate worries. Did it matter that one of us was still a student at the time of the interview? Did it matter that one of us had not started and the other not yet finished a PhD? Was our lack of experience in teaching at this level going to count against us? The question we now ask ourselves is: Did Bradford even know what they were getting when they hired us? That is a question we cannot answer but just as we could make a judgement of whether Bradford was a suitable place for us, Bradford could,

throughout the course of the interview process, make a judgement on whether we would fit.

The interview process was split into two official parts. In the morning we were asked to give a presentation on our teaching, learning, assessment and research strategies as well as what we might bring to the school; in the afternoon we were interviewed formally.

This process was complimented by two informal interludes. First we were individually taken on a tour of the grounds by the law school administrator who, of course, reported her impressions back to the Head of School. Secondly there was lunch: this is terribly nerve-racking for candidates who truly want the job. What if we had spilt water all over the Dean of the School? Would this have ruined our chances? What if we were asked a difficult question which we could not answer without great thought? Would they think we had something to hide? In the end, it was not as bad as anticipated although we ended up sitting next to and opposite the Head of School somewhat increasing our anxiety levels. No water was spilled, no ice cream flung across the room and we proceeded to formal interview.

Interviews are difficult mainly because the candidate does not know what to expect. It is difficult to plan ahead for something which is purposely meant to put you on the spot; meant to test you. We were nervous and, as is to be expected, those nerves manifested themselves in different ways. While one could not stop talking the other was concerned that the panel's questions had not been answered fully enough. Both of us however, had similar concerns after the interview: What if we made promises which we ultimately

could not deliver? Was the Head of School going to pull us into his office one year down the line and bellow at us that we had breached our contracts because we had not delivered on promises made at the interview? Would they have hired us under false pretences?

Interviews are terribly stressful when you are very keen on the job. At Bradford we were all asked to wait in a common staff room with the other candidates. On the one hand this was a positive experience. We were able to ask each other questions about the panel, the type of questions and the other candidates' experience. On the other hand it was difficult to not worry about the quality of the other candidates and size up the competition, knowing that they were of course doing the same.

Our experience of the interview process described above was very similar. However, the settling in period which followed seems to have been experienced very differently.

Student turned Lecturer – Formalities and Settling in: Lisa's experience

The formalities which beleaguered my first semester were the numerous, and included University inductions (none of which I can remember) and enrolment on the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education and Practice. Having already completed a PGCE in further education, I feel as though my effort second time around is merely 'ticking an administrative box', and I would much rather be spending this time planning the new seminars and tutorials which fill my diary. Interestingly, many new lecturers who I speak to about this share a similar view, but there is little I can do about this small annoyance

until I complete the course. I will, of course, be proud at the end of the experience to be a fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

My first semester saw me metamorphosing from student to lecturer overnight.

Particularly with me moving from Newcastle to Bradford, it was a sweeping and total change. My Head of School recognised the need for me to settle, and so my teaching load was 'gentle' in my first semester compared to my new colleagues'. I hope he knows how grateful I am for this!

Researcher turned Lecturer - Formalities and Settling in: Jessica's experience.

I felt at home in Bradford from the minute I first set foot in the Law School. I had actually reduced my commuting time (to 12 minutes by car!) and had not moved house. I felt like I found my way around the Law School and School of Management very quickly. I had (and still have) some very valuable help and support from our administrator who not only has an open door but also an open ear. If Val does not know the answer to a particular question then the answer has probably not been worked out yet! I also experienced the inductions as very positive and helpful. While I agree that there were too many of them in too short a space of time, I think the information given has proved useful and has helped me find my way around the university administration when I have needed to. It also allowed me to meet people outside of my own discipline which is something that is surprisingly hard to achieve in a university setting.

My experience of the Postgraduate Certificate mentioned above is also less negative. I believe there are two main reasons for this. First, I do not already hold a teaching qualification and therefore the course is not just a tick in a box for me. Two out of three

modules of the course have proved very interesting and useful. I do however share all the misgivings expressed by colleagues about the e-learning module taught as part of the PGC. Second, as part of my research work I have been interested in Higher Education policy for some time and I have also developed an interest in legal education specifically. Much of the PGC course allows me to explore that interest.

Concerns as new lecturers

Despite our different experience of settling in and out different starting points, our concerns are surprisingly similar. Both of us were concerned about being perceived as young by the students and worried about being taken seriously by them. We were also concerned about how our new colleagues would take to us and whether they would accept us as a full part of the academic team. In our early work towards this paper, Lisa wrote 'Being the youngest member of the team (at 23), I found that I had somewhat different concerns to other new lecturers on the team'. However, Jessica's concerns were no different.

It is now also apparent that the concerns were mostly unfounded. We have integrated into the team and each play our part in it. Students have accepted us as their teachers and in many ways being relatively young has its advantages when dealing with them. They have no qualms in being brutally honest in expressing their thoughts about their degree, their assessments, and (sometimes) other staff. This is an advantage and a disadvantage. We

often fully understand how they think, what they find important, what they want and what they care about and can therefore relate to them. However, authority is difficult to assert with particularly lively groups of students especially when they begin to see you as an 'older sister' sort of figure rather than as a lecturer.

Conclusions

Thankfully, Bradford University exceeded many of our expectations as new lecturers. Many law departments may not take account of personal circumstances when planning the type and amount of work for each person. However, at Bradford we have been allowed to work to our strengths and have been encouraged to develop our potential. It takes a long time to adapt to the 'system' of teaching and learning at a new institution. Teaching, research, assessment and administrative tasks all have their own rules, procedures and stages which must be followed. We foresee that we will still be asking many questions well into our lectureships. However, we also know that those questions will not fall on deaf ears. We have been well looked after by the rest of the team and our Head of School in particular. We have been supported in different stages of our PhD, one at the proposal stage, one nearing the end. We have been given opportunities to attend conferences, meetings and courses and to develop the experience, skills and networks that will help us excel in the future.

Reflections of a Head of School

Jessica and Lisa joined us when the Law School was two years old and we had eight members of academic staff – seven will not see their 40th birthdays again! We had wanted, in the first two years, to ensure a core staff with the experience to deliver Foundation modules and a willingness to roll their sleeves up and get on with whatever needed doing. We were very fortunate in achieving this and adding four new colleagues at the end of year one to those who had opened the School in 2005 had gone without disturbing the ethos. We now were looking for people at an earlier point in their careers to provide back up, new ideas and balance the team in terms of experience and skills. We saw a number of good candidates over the days of interview, but these two and the other colleague who joined at the time were head and shoulders more of a ‘fit’ for what we wanted and needed than any others. Had the application been at any other time or had Jessica and Lisa been looking for employment at any other time, our various paths may never have crossed and this shows part of the serendipitous nature of the ‘employment game’.

We were very aware that the new members of the team may well need support above the formal mentoring roles the university assigns, beyond the September induction rush and beyond the pointing out of where the cafeteria lies. As we had all moved to the university within the previous two years and as a body of eight people has a direct interest in the addition of another three people to its midst, everyone genuinely was interested and prepared to help. It should also be said that the School administrator is of a type whereby colleagues are not only administered by her but counselled and nurtured

and this is something about which we must not forget. It would be hard not to feel part of an organisation which had a Val administering it!

As all Law School staff are located on one corridor (a series of converted conference bedrooms – we should get our own ‘School’ within two years), it is easy to keep a dialogue going with most colleagues. I had wanted to establish a culture of openness, an ethos of hard work and a camaraderie which belied the hierarchical nature of universities from day one and I believe we have gone a long way towards achieving this.

Jess, Lisa and their other new colleague had ‘Bradford’ written all over them when they were interviewed. Fortunately, they also scored best against the more established criteria for selection between candidates but it certainly seemed they would ‘fit’. At the risk of descending into self congratulatory piece, this has been the experience of the first academic year with our new colleagues and now we are in the employment market again hoping that serendipity along with common sense and Employment Law will be on our side again.....